

Implementing Online Training and Assessment to Support Peer Reference in a Business Library

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As a business librarian at the Robert L. Turchin Library at Tulane University, one of my key responsibilities was the daily management and training of our student workers. Turchin Library is a small branch library embedded within the A.B. Freeman School of Business, supported by two librarians and between ten and fourteen student workers. These student workers operate the services desk in the library's research center, providing reference assistance based on the peer reference model. Peer reference provides the opportunity to improve service to our student population. Student workers are first and foremost students, which means they are more likely to use language understood by the majority of our patrons – undergraduates and masters students – as well as having the ability to relate their personal experiences (Bodemer 164). Some may be concerned as to whether undergraduates can provide quality reference services, however research indicates that undergraduate workers are capable of providing quality reference services, so long as they are trained to find and communicate information, analyze information requests, and provide basic research support (Bodemer 168; Faix et al. 90–107). In order to best prepare the student workers to provide peer reference, we needed to develop and implement a training program, taking into account their widely ranging schedule demands and varying skillsets. This training program was planned and implemented during the 2014-2015 academic year.

The first step in developing this training program was creating an online information portal using the learning management system, Blackboard. The student assistant portal included expectations, daily and emergency procedures, contact information, as well as a space for administering online training quizzes. These quizzes became a critical component toward achieving our training program goals, which were to enable student workers to:

- answer directional queries with little to no effort
- troubleshoot common technology problems
- help patrons learn how to navigate and use the catalog and discovery layer
- locate physical and online resources, including research guides and subject databases based on the nature of the query
- recognize when a patron's query is too complex and requires the assistance of a librarian

At the beginning of fall semester, or whenever new employees started, I administered an online scavenger hunt, a 26-question quiz designed to help the staff members familiarize themselves with where to find answers on Blackboard, within in the physical library space, and on the library websites. Analyzing the results allowed me to pinpoint common areas of confusion, which I could then address with the entire group through weekly e-mails and/or coaching.

Following the online scavenger hunt, student workers were tasked with completing short training quizzes, usually comprised of three to five questions, administered on an almost weekly basis to teach business research skills and to address areas where students found difficulty. Areas of struggle were identified through observation of interactions, noting common questions where librarians provided assistance, and through analysis of reference transactions entered into LibAnalytics. Business research skill questions were designed to deepen familiarity around a specific research guide or

database. For instance, many of our student workers struggled with helping users with Bloomberg Professional. To address this problem, a quiz was administered that taught the basics of setting up an account and navigating the database, thus increasing comfort levels and demystifying the resource. Quiz questions were sometimes designed to prepare student workers for common business research requests tied to known assignments and projects within the business school.

Student workers had a week to complete each quiz while working and did not have to finish in one sitting. This allowed students to ask questions of coworkers and librarians. Students were encouraged to struggle a bit before seeking librarian guidance. Self-guided work creates a resourceful staff that can learn to struggle, but not get frustrated when stuck (Connell and Mileham 77). The openness of the quizzes also provided opportunities for experienced student workers to develop training skills, since they would be “training the trainer.”

The quizzes provided a tool for continual assessment of performance. Quiz answers identified coaching opportunities when students used less than optimal strategies. During individual coaching sessions, we walked students through finding the answer by asking probing questions and prompting the student through the search process. Student workers are more likely to absorb key learnings if they perform the task, as opposed to observing. (Connell and Mileham 76). Online training quizzes also allowed us to evaluate the level of engagement and effort of our student workers. When students failed to complete quizzes in a timely manner or submitted poor quality work, it created opportunities for employee development. Assessment also pinpointed the stronger performers, providing an opportunity to plan work schedules strategically.

There are two major fears in regards to student workers providing reference services: (1) the potential for the student worker’s failure to recognize a more complex information request buried in a simple question, and (2) the possibility of the student worker failing to refer the question to the librarian when it should be (Borin 199). We addressed these fears using a two-prong approach. First, we identified issues in reference transactions using LibAnalytics and addressed these through coaching, training quizzes, and written communication. The second tactic was to add reference interview training to our semi-annual training at the beginning of spring semester, which included role-playing between the two librarians. I followed up by conducting one-on-one practice with students when on shift, and created dialogue-based question sets for the training quizzes designed to imitate reference interviews.

Designing and implementing online training quizzes through the learning management system provided a necessary training tool to ensure the ability to provide high quality reference sessions, as well as assisted with management and staff development. The students benefited from this program by building transferable research skills that are applicable both in the classroom and in their chosen careers. Developing the quizzes was a learning process, which adapted as we observed student strengths and weaknesses, as well as assessed which questions were clear and seemed particularly effective. The biggest challenges in administering continual online training are ensuring timely feedback, especially during parts of the term when demands are high, and continually developing fresh questions that allow students to learn and repeatedly practice research skills. Nevertheless, at Turchin Library, it was definitely worth the effort.

Works Cited

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